**Creative Kids: How to go on a nature hunt - in your own back garden**

Experts say now is the perfect time for families to get outdoors and witness nature in all its resplendence, writes Kathy Donaghy

May 20 2020 02:30

THE swallows arrived early this year. They swooped and dipped into our garden in a frenzy of enthusiasm bringing much needed joy to our lockdown and reminding us that when so much of life has paused, nature is celebrating.

Their arrival in the middle of last month coincides with one of the busiest periods of the year for wildlife. Nests are being built, chicks and being hatched, fox cubs are being born. And even though we can’t go very far at the minute, the swallows are also a reminder that we don’t have to leave our gardens to see nature up close and personal.

Rewild your garden

Natural history expert and author Juanita Browne, who has just published a new guide for people to help wildlife in their gardens, says while we can’t replicate natural habitats that have taken many thousands of years to evolve, we can try to replicate semi-natural ‘mini-versions’ that meet these needs. This can be done by leaving an area of your garden that mimics a woodland edge, a wildflower strip that mimics a meadow, or a section of native hedgerow or small pond.

Attract the ‘mini beasts’

Making a log pile for ‘mini beasts’ or insects is also another fun and easy activity to encourage smaller creatures into your garden, according to Juanita. By placing it near other wildlife features, such as a hedgerow, tree, pond, or bird bath, you can help create a wildlife corridor in your garden. However she advises that this log pile should be situated in a quiet corner away from games and activities to maximise its attractiveness to shy mini beasts.

Make a splash

Laois County Council heritage officer Catherine Casey says you don’t have to have a pond to bring creatures that love water to your garden. A sauce pan will do the same job and encourage insects like beetles or even frogs.

Spot the birds

According to Niall Hatch, spokesman for BirdWatch Ireland, they’ve seen a big increase in requests for information from parents who want to answer their children’s questions on bird life. Birds, he says, are a gateway into how the natural world works and are easier to spot than insects or secretive mammals.

Niall recommends having a good reference book to hand like Ireland’s Garden Birds by Oran O’Sullivan and Jim Wilson so you can identify what you see and build up your birdwatching skills and confidence.

Create a butterfly border

As well as looking pretty, your butterfly border — an area of wildflowers and native plants at the edge of a lawn for example — will provide great food for pollinators. Juanita Browne says caterpillars have become a much rarer sight in these days of more manicured, sterile gardens.

Keep a diary

According to Una Halpin, who runs Wild Ways Adventures based in Carlow, doing a spring nature challenge by keeping a diary of what you record in the garden is an easy activity parents can do with their children. This could be as simple as drawing the trees and plants coming into leaf, taking photographs and observing the changes over a few weeks, says Una.

Nocturnal visitors

Seeing some of our most elusive mammals – bats — can be an exciting night-time activity for parents and their children, according to Tina Aughney of Bat Conservation Ireland. By keeping flood lights out of your garden and leaving wild patches to encourage insects, which the bats like to eat, there’s a good chance you’ll get bats coming around, she says.

**\* For more information and resources seebirdwatchireland.ie Laois County Council have just published a new book for families on Gardening for Biodiversity which is available at laois.ie/gardening-for-biodiversity**